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AUTHOR Murphy, Kathleen V.
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ABSTRACT

A college composition instructor who approached her course from a feminist perspective found it difficult to overcome students' arguments and frustration until she obtained the help of an ethnographer. The ethnographer got involved with the instructor's evening classes on a regional campus for an entire semester. It was discovered that male and female students in the class were operating along very different intellectual and moral schemes and were reacting differently to the instructor's authority. Male students were less willing to accept the female instructor's sources of knowledge and to share their own writing with the rest of the class. The women in the class, many of whom were mothers, appeared to feel responsibility to their classmates, especially if it meant they could be instructive. In retrospect, it would have been helpful to understand differences in male and female cognitive and moral development and to learn where each student seemed to be in his or her development. The goal would be to engage all students in a dialogue that recognizes both genders' ways of knowing, so that the teacher could teach instead of struggling against students' hardened resistance to change. (SG)

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Kathleen V. Murphy

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Feminist Pedagogy and Student Constructions of Knowledge and Female Authority

Kathleen V. Murphy

In my relatively short teaching career, I've experienced a lot of frustrating resistance from many of my students to my feminist pedagogy. From the beginning, I expected some conflict and tension, which I think *can* be useful in a classroom, but I found that my students ended up spending more time arguing with each other and with me instead of also learning to try to understand each other and at least consider the plausibility of alternate views. I was also frustrated by having to spend so much class time and personal energy arguing with male students who felt threatened or resentful toward feminism and other non-traditional values or epistemologies. The net result paralleled what several studies have revealed about gender differences in education from kindergarten to graduate school: male and female teachers alike spend more classroom time on male students, obviously at the expense of female students.

I wasn't exactly sure, though, how to concretely identify the causes of the problem, much less address them. But having an ethnographer, Laurel Black, involved with my evening class at a regional campus for a whole semester has clarified a number of issues for me. She used Belenky's *Women's Ways of Knowing* as an interpretive guide and discovered, among other things, that my male and female students were operating along very different intellectual and moral schemes, which accounted for some of the tension in the class. Black made an equally important discovery about their response to my authority. Most of the women eventually identified with me, but many of the male students could not identify with me, much less accept me as an authoritative figure in the classroom. Not only did they reject my authority, but they also rejected what I considered to be authoritative sources of knowledge.

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Black's observations confirmed some of my concerns and raised some questions for me about my teaching and the way that my students experience my class. So I'd like to start with some of those questions and related issues and work towards approaching some ways to address them. To begin with: how do I negotiate the differences that Black observed in women's and men's different ways of interacting and knowing without disadvantaging women or over privileging men? Similarly, how do I continue to empower women in my classes and legitimate their perspectives without alienating my male students or giving them any reason to become further entrenched in an anti-feminist position? And how do I maintain a student-oriented, feminist pedagogy centered on personal connection and teaching for change if as Black's studies suggest, many male students are not personally engaged with their education and are unreceptive to change?

But all of these questions beg a much more basic issue: what counts as authority and knowledge, as legitimate ways of knowing, in the classroom? If I don't entirely accept traditional constructs of knowledge and authority, how can I incorporate other ways of knowing, especially women's ways, if my students can dismiss my authority and the reject the kind of knowledge I value with one narrative stroke? What options do I have in trying to teach for change if my students won't acknowledge my authority to even address issues privilege and inequality, much less to create change?

I'd like to go back to the beginning of the class that Black observed and spend some time on this last issue—on tracing some of those sources of resistance and how they affected the perception of knowledge— both of which seem to impact on the other questions involved.

On the very first night of that particular semester, a young male student established a pattern that persisted throughout the term. We were discussing NCTE guidelines on non-sexist language and he said "You know it really rattles my chains

when I have to change the way I talk just for a couple of women." Well, instead of taking issue with the "just for a couple of women" bit, I decided on a different tactic by pointing out that these guidelines were the policy of an English department dominated by male faculty. He responded, "Yeah, well, I've met a few of them, and they're a pretty weird bunch," (which I don't doubt, but that's besides the point). So right from the beginning, even if my authority had institutional backing, a personal opinion could be used to dismiss my policies as trivial, special interests that had no place in the classroom.

But that was not the only area where our ideas about what was appropriate for an English course differed. As Black's student interviews reveal, they had constructed a picture of an English course that was far more traditional and much more teacher-centered than the one I had in mind. They anticipated a semester of practicing grammar drills and having "verbs crammed down their throats all night"— which apparently was preferable to having their "chains rattled" by the inconvenience of dealing with sexist language.

However, I made clear to them from the beginning that this would not be a traditional English course. Knowledge and authority would be negotiable. I didn't establish myself as the primary source of learning; rather I would expect them to share responsibility for the content of the class. Their views and experiences would be a part of the classroom text. I tried to position myself as a facilitator with more knowledge about composition but not more knowledge about their lives and experiences. As a facilitator, I would provide feedback on their writing—in addition to the feedback they would provide for each other—and I would suggest alternate contexts to reconsider their experiences and values. They would be writing not just to me but to a diverse audience with with varied expectations and backgrounds.

Unlike William Perry's more traditional model, where the teacher moves the students toward independent thinking by leading them through the teacher's

intellectual process my approach was closer to what Belenky, in *Women's Ways of Knowing*, calls "connected teaching." In this model, the teacher treats the students like independent subjects, and asks them to consider their own agendas in addition to the teacher's or the institution's. Belenky sees this model as more beneficial to women because it involves collaboration, cooperation and sharing,—something women are essentially socialized for. Belenky notes, too, though, that while men might also benefit from the connected model, they could have trouble adapting to such a approach in the same way that some women have a hard time functioning traditional androcentric models. Most of my male students seemed more geared towards a classroom based on linear logic, and objective, controlled discussions of abstract principles and rights—not personal connections, responsibilities or relationships.

This might explain why the men resisted even sharing their writing with the rest of the class—which seems like a reasonable request in a composition course. When I asked for volunteer readers, the male students in particular would summarize or paraphrase their writing without directly referring to the text. When pressed, one older male responded, "I know what I've written"—which didn't exactly help the rest of the class much. Many of the men seemed to have romantic ideals about the lone writer, the lone artist, who constructed knowledge in isolation, apart from everyone else. In Perry's scheme of cognitive development such students would be classified at the second stage, in which they trust their own knowledge and opinions over those of outside authorities, and they see themselves as staking out their own intellectual territory.

But the romantic ideals implicit in this stage clearly conflicted with a feminist classroom that treated knowledge as a collaborative production and that stressed connection and shared responsibility. Being willing to read their written work aloud so that the rest of the class could hear what other beginning writers sounded

like was a part of that responsibility. Most of the female students, on the other hand, were raising and teaching their own children, and they did feel a responsibility to their classmates, especially if it meant they could be instructive. It seemed to be part of their socialization as women and mothers. Conversely, the men (some of whom were fathers) felt they had a right to learn—to be taught, to get something out of the class—but they didn't seem to feel the same responsibility to teach their classmates. So it's likely that at least some of their resistance to a feminist pedagogy stemmed from their socialization and their stage of cognitive and moral development. They simply many not have been at a point where they could develop a strong sense of personal responsibility for others. So perhaps they felt justified in rejecting me as an authority because, in asking them to teach each other, they believed I was neglecting my responsibility to teach them.

If that were the case, it might also explain why they could so easily reject the non-personal "evidence" as well as the personal stories I offered in support of my views. In a classroom where relating knowledge through stories became a weekly ritual, I rarely got to complete a narrative. They cut me off before I got to what Labov would call the evaluation stage where I could tie my story into research, statistics, or other sources of information that I had introduced. And sometimes even if I got that far, they often shifted the topic to another area and avoided discussing the implications of my stories.

Many of my male students also dismissed other narratives as well, typically, the kind that, like my own, combined a narrative style with academic sources. One such narrative was a controversial Affirmative Action article, which most of the male students soundly rejected. The piece included the story of the writer's educational and professional life but also relied on information beyond the writer's experience and was written in an academic, professional voice. Apparently, for narratives to be accepted as legitimate, they had to be in delivered in oral speech or they had to

sound that way. Narratives couldn't be by "slanted" by any kind of non-personal information, or research—the kind of knowledge that informed many of my views. And if it reflected a "feminine bias," it was too subjective, unreliable or just plain wrong, even if the women in the class could attest to its accuracy.

In fact, in response to the Affirmative Action article, one of the male students bitterly complained "What does this have to do with English anyway?" So not only was I dismissed as an authoritative voice, but so were the female students and female writers—which is very much contrary to the men's belief that women and women's views were exclusively privileged in the class. The male students seemed to feel much more entitled to dominate discourse, to pronounce what was valid or invalid knowledge, and even to challenge my right to shape the content of the class.

In retrospect and with the help of Black's ethnography, I have a much clearer understanding of the gender dynamics of that class. If I had known then, what I'm beginning to learn now about male and female cognitive and moral development I would certainly have done a few things differently. After having "rattled a few chains" at the first class meeting , I would also have kept in mind that if Perry's scheme of intellectual development doesn't come "naturally" to women—and Belenky and Gilligan's findings suggest as much— neither do women's ways of knowing come naturally to men. In fact women's perspectives—which are often unrecognized, much less articulated—would probably seem especially alien to men.

Therefore, I would have tried to first get at least *some idea*, some sense of where each student seemed to be in his or her intellectual and moral development and proceed from there. Then I would begin asking the kinds of questions that engages students in a dialogue about difference. They could use their class time working towards trying to understand their differences instead of a debating about who's right and who's wrong. I would ask my students to consider what it means to

"think like a man" and to "think like a woman." What are the advantages and disadvantages of both ways? How could they benefit from trying to think in the opposite-gendered way? What do men learn by talking and debating? What do women learn by, eliciting talk from others and from doing the kind of active listening that Laurel observed?

I'd like to go back to one particular discussion in which the gender division was especially evident, as an example of how to get at some of those issues. The topic that evening was an article called "The Execution Class" in which a teacher describes his students' reaction to the social and political costs of capitalism. Several women responded that they felt a sense of responsibility to the people who have been exploited and oppressed in the name of free enterprise. Another women, Debbie, observed that there was too large a gap between rich and poor. Geoff, a younger male student replied:

> I disagree. All I see are the middle class. Someone's gotta step on somebody else. Hell I wanna be rich. If I don't do it, someone else would. I'd step on someone to get what I want. But I don't believe that if I see something I want and I go for it, that's hurting anyone.

I asked him, "If we could convince you, Geoff, that a person would die or starve because of your stepping on someone, if for each of your successes someone was hurt would you still say the same thing?" He didn't find that scenario believable at all, so I said it was a hypothetical situation and repeated the question. We went back and forth like that several times until he finally responded, "Maybe, if you could convince me." Debbie chimed in: "Guess what. It's happening *n o w*."

I have fond memories of that moment, partly because instead of fighting with Geoff, I was indirectly asking him to think the way women are trained to think: that is, to consider contexts—not just his "right" to succeed— to consider who could get

hurt, not just who profits. He may still have felt on the defensive at that point, but even if he didn't truly try to see the situation as a woman might, a woman's perspective was articulated.

But I also think I dropped the ball in some ways because I didn't ask Debbie to elaborate on *her* reasoning. And I can recall a related episode in which a Linda, a returning student, tried to articulate her moral orientation. She explained that a cashier had given her back twenty dollars too much and that she decided not to keep her little windfall. A number of the male students chortled and insisted that it was a foolish choice. She couldn't really explain her position beyond saying, "I thought about what Kathy [me] would've done in that situation."

And I let it go at that. Now that was an opportunity missed. I should have helped her through her rational, pointed her in the right direction by saying "Linda identifies with someone who tries to be socially responsible; she would've weighed the consequences to *others* for her actions; was 20 dollars worth someone's job? Returning the money was more important than any personal gain because she feel a responsibility to other people. Instead of debating with the men over whether or not Linda's response was foolish, I should have created a space, an opening for a woman to articulate a world view that's rarely given voice in such settings. Linda, in turn, would've benefited by hearing her ideas discussed from multiple perspectives and in an academic environment. She would also have benefited by hearing her ideas recast in academic terms: the language of academia would be modeled for and other women in the same way that it's consistently modeled for male students. And in the process, I would have been giving the Men a chance to hear an alternative voice, not another argument, or another reason to dismiss me.

At the same time, I believe such an approach would give me the chance to validate men's experiences and men's knowledge from a feminist perspective and perhaps convince my male students that feminism might have something to offer

them. I would hope to convince them that a feminist vision sees academic and professional success in terms of mutual empowerment and not the traditional and often limited alternatives of all- or -nothing, win or lose—i.e. stepping on others to get ahead. At the same time, I would have to make clear that my feminist pedagogy is not designed, as many of my male students believed, to attack men, but to encourage men to see their often privileged status relative to women. Most importantly, though, I would have to emphasize that feminism isn't about totally disempowering men in the classroom and elsewhere but about offering women and men an All- and- Anything possibility—the Win-Win scenario that Belenky sees embodied in women's approaches to learning and succeeding. My goal, then, would be to engage all of my students in a dialogue that recognizes both women's and men's ways of knowing and that could allow me to teach for change instead of struggling with a general a backlash against feminism and a hardened resistance to change.

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